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Where do Spain's political parties stand after the country's local and regional elections?



Spain's local and regional elections on 24 May were expected to give an indication of where the main parties stand in the leadup to the country's next general election. [Paul Kennedy](#) writes that while Mariano Rajoy's Popular Party and the centre-left PSOE remain Spain's two largest parties, the elections confirmed their overall decline alongside the rise of new challengers in the shape of Podemos and Ciudadanos.

The Spanish local and regional elections held on 24 May present a complicated picture just six months before voters return to the polling booths to elect a new government. For the first time to date, not a single region is in receipt of an overall majority, with minority or coalition governments being the order of the day. The impressive results obtained by mayoral candidates representing [Podemos](#)-backed coalitions of leftist parties in Madrid (Ahora Madrid – Madrid Now) and Barcelona (Barcelona en Comu – Barcelona Together) has attracted much media attention, but the significance of the elections goes beyond the question of who will occupy the town halls of Spain's two leading cities.

A difficult night for Mariano Rajoy

The governing [Popular Party](#) (PP), despite having gained most votes in nine of the thirteen regions holding elections, has ample reason to feel uneasy about the future. Gaining just 27 per cent of the vote – 10 per cent less than in 2011 – the PP obtained almost 2.5 million fewer votes, losing all the overall majorities it won four years ago. Arguing throughout the election campaign that its tough austerity measures had placed the country on the path to recovery – the Spanish economy is likely to be the fastest growing in the Eurozone throughout the course of 2015 – the PP will be disappointed that its message has failed to resonate with a large section of the electorate.



Credit: Contando Estrelas (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, chose not to appear before the cameras on election night after the polls closed, but his government's problems go beyond his perceived communication shortcomings. In the immediate aftermath of the elections, prominent voices within the party stressed the need for renewal and regeneration in the run-up to this year's general election, with some even suggesting that Rajoy should step down.

Of particular concern will be the party's failure to attract younger voters, who appear to be shunning both the PP and the opposition [Socialist Party](#) (PSOE) in favour of Podemos and Ciudadanos (Citizens – C's). Ciudadanos's support will prove decisive in maintaining the PP's control at the regional level in Madrid, Murcia, Castilla and León, and La Rioja. The PP may nevertheless obtain some consolation from the fact that its rival on the centre-right obtained just 6.6 per cent of the vote. Ciudadanos's leader, Albert Rivera, nevertheless has the satisfaction of seeing its total number of councillors increase from just eleven in 2011 to 1,500 in 2015.

Podemos and the PSOE

The election results also leave the PSOE with much to ponder. Obtaining 450,000 fewer votes than the PP and 700,000 fewer than it obtained in 2011, Pedro Sánchez's party fared particularly poorly in Spain's larger cities, and obtained the largest number of votes in just two of the thirteen regions holding elections. Nevertheless, with the support of Podemos, and, in certain regions, that of a third party, the PSOE will be in a position to govern in Aragón, the Balears, Valencia, Asturias, Castilla-La Mancha and Extremadura, as well as being the junior partner in Canarias. Andalucía is already in the party's hands following its victory in March's regional elections, although Susana Díaz has yet to gain the votes necessary to be officially declared President two months later, thereby illustrating the complicated nature of the horse-trading which is likely to be a feature of Spanish politics over the coming months.

The relationship between the PSOE and Podemos is likely to be tense, given the latter's depiction of the Socialists as the personification of the corrupt, self-serving 'casta' which has been such a feature of Podemos's discourse. Moreover, the leader of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, has often expressed his party's wish to replace the PSOE as the leading party on the left. The relationship between the two parties is therefore likely to remain cold as Iglesias prepares his party for the general election on the back of an impressive, although not spectacular, set of results.

The prospect of Podemos-backed mayors in Spain's two leading cities – Manuela Carmena in Madrid and Ada Colau in Barcelona – is nevertheless remarkable. Carmena, who was on the Spanish Communist Party's list for the 1977 general election, is a retired labour lawyer who was lucky to escape death that same year when far-right extremists attacked the practice in which she was working, killing five of her colleagues. Colau has been prominent in the movement opposing the eviction of those unable to keep up mortgage payments due to the economic downturn. She will be Barcelona's first ever female mayor.

A party system in flux

Overall, the effect of the local and regional elections has been to confirm the decline of both the PP and the PSOE, albeit preserving their status as Spain's two leading political parties.

Although the challenge posed by Podemos and Ciudadanos has not been as great as some had predicted at this set of elections, the political arena has undoubtedly become more competitive, forcing all leading political forces onto the defensive.

The Communist-led Izquierda Unida (United Left) seems – not for the first time – to be on life-support, its relevance increasingly called into question in the shadow of Podemos. Similarly, Rosa Díez’s Union, Progress and Democracy (UPyD) appears to be in free-fall, obtaining just 200,000 votes. Díez has indicated that she will not stand for re-election as leader and the resignation of two of the party’s five parliamentary representatives over recent months has been a further indication of the disarray within the party as it has struggled to come to terms with the rise of Ciudadanos.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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